

GILPARRKA ALMIRA

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Gilparrka Almira is the first rock art site to be recorded in Mithaka Country.

It consists of engravings on the western face of a steeply sloping, north-south oriented sandstone rock outcrop. The name is derived from “Gilparrka”, the name of the creek where the site is located, and “Almira”, meaning “paintings or etchings” in the Mithaka language (Franklin et al. 2021).

There is a single panel of engravings at the site, but images are clustered in different areas demarcated by natural cracks and fissures in the rock. The majority of the engravings are crescents or variations on crescent motifs, with a much smaller number of other non-figurative images. Most of the crescents constitute upside-down U-shapes.

The much smaller number of remaining motifs includes single or multiple straight lines, single rows of dots, a meandering line (a possible snake) and a bisected upside-down U-shape, which is possibly a bird track with ‘spur’. Gilparrka Almira has the highest percentage of crescent motifs and crescent designs (82%) compared to other documented rock art sites, which vary from 1% to 39% at most (Franklin et al. 2021).

The majority of engravings at the site have been pounded (direct percussion), merely bruising the rock surface. A small number of the engravings have been produced by pecking (indirect percussion). The patina of the rock, an uneven dark red hue, as well as a black deposit (possibly desert varnish) provides a striking background, highlighting the lighter coloured engravings. The engravings themselves do not appear to exhibit any significant evidence of re-patination (change of the surface through age and weathering).

The rock engravings from Gilparrka Almira are similar to rock art common to Australia’s deserts, a body of art with a limited range of tracks and mostly non-figurative (geometric) images, including crescents/arcs. Crescent motifs may carry a range of possible meanings, including boomerangs, crescent moons, rainbows, caves, huts, people sitting or standing, or tally marks.

The use of non-figurative motifs with a range of possible meanings is particularly suited to societies where certain information is restricted to people of a particular status, such as level of initiation. The non-figurative component of art cannot be understood until a person is instructed in its meaning. The visual ambiguity of non-figurative motifs enables different interpretations to be given to different individuals depending upon their status and level of initiation (Morphy, 1981).

The range of meanings varies according to the different contexts in which the motifs are used.



Drawing of the rock art at Gilparrka Almira, 2021. Illustration: E. Pease

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS: DREAMING TRACKS AND TRADE ROUTES

The nature of Gilparrka Almira may reflect cultural connections with other sites from across the continent through the social relationships formed by trade and exchange networks and Dreaming tracks. The trade in pituri, stone artefacts and ochre was often accompanied by the exchange of what might be termed more “symbolic” behavioural traits, such as songs and dances, as well as the manufacture, display, and barter of ceremonial paraphernalia.

Dreaming tracks are the routes taken by Dreamtime Ancestral Beings as they emerged from the earth during the creative era and travelled across the Country, creating the current landscape features, animals, plants and people, and establishing Aboriginal law and languages before re-entering the earth or ascending into the sky. They frequently extended across group boundaries, providing “chains of connection” (in John Mulvaney’s words) between people and places, linking Aboriginal groups across vast distances.

Dreaming tracks facilitated meetings between local and travelling groups of Aboriginal people for gift exchange and the rituals associated with the myths relevant to the tracks. Dreaming tracks therefore frequently correlated with the trade routes, suggesting that both the tracks and the trade routes formed a means for the interaction of people across the landscape.

Rock art motifs were linked with Dreaming tracks, and with the custodianship of particular parcels of land. These mechanisms also allowed for the diffusion of similar rock art motifs over extensive distances. Dale Kerwin, for example, detailed overlaps between Dreaming tracks and recent trade routes, including the Two Dog Dreaming and the pituri trade route. Such routes could be the mechanisms for the movement/diffusion of engraved crescent and crescent-type motifs in northerly and southerly directions.

If crescent motifs or variations on crescent designs carried a range of meanings in artistic systems according to the contexts of their use, it is likely these motifs were suitable for diffusion along the trade route/Dreaming track as they could be easily incorporated into the existing social systems of the different Aboriginal groups along the way. In this scenario, the meanings of the motifs may change as the motifs diffused along the trade route, but the morphology of the motifs could remain unchanged.

SOURCES

Natalie R. Franklin et al., ‘Gilparrka Almira, a rock art site in Mithaka Country, southwest Queensland: cultural connections, dreaming tracks and trade routes’ *Archaeology in Oceania* 56 (2021): 284–303.

See Howard Morphy, ‘Art of northern Australia’ in *Aboriginal Australia* (exhibition catalogue), (Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors Council, 1981): pp. 53–65.

See D.J. Mulvaney, ‘“The chain of connection”: The material evidence’, in Nicolas Peterson (ed.), *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1976), pp. 72–94 and Nicolas Peterson, *Australian Territorial Organisation: A Band Perspective* (Oceania Monograph 30), (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1986).

Dale Kerwin, *Aboriginal Dreaming Paths and Trading Routes* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).



Detail view of Gilparrka Almira, Southern end of panel, 2021. Photo: M. Giorgi



Detail, Southern end of panel, 2021. Photo: M. Giorgi

DREAMING TRACKS ARE THE
ROUTES TAKEN BY DREAMTIME
ANCESTRAL BEINGS AS THEY
EMERGED FROM THE EARTH
DURING THE CREATIVE ERA AND
TRAVELED ACROSS THE COUNTRY...
